

A Q&A with Philip Womack on The Broken King

How would you describe The Broken King to someone who hasn't read it?

It's a fast-moving, dark fantasy about searching for a lost sibling, featuring a knight that can turn into a swan, mysterious golden messengers, car chases, demi-gods and a giant snake made out of shadows. And lots of other things.

What's your favourite scene in the book?

The second chapter, where the hero, Simon, meets a golden woman on a deer with iridescent, peacock-like wings, for the first time. I wanted to create a sense of warmth and mystery and excitement.

What was the most fun to write? What was the hardest chapter or scene to write?

It was all very enjoyable to write: the pain comes in the editing. The first chapter, in which Simon wishes his sister away, went through several edits; so much so that I began to think I might never finish it. So definitely that one.

What were your favourite books when you were young? Have any of them influenced The Broken King?

I loved T H White's *The Once and Future King*, a cycle of Arthurian stories, and I think some of that has definitely found its way into *The Broken King: the Knight of the Swan*, for instance. In the second book we'll see more of these knights, about which I am very excited.

Can you tell us about the poem that inspired the book? What other poems would you really recommend to young readers?

Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" is a rather extraordinary piece of work: it takes its inspiration from a line in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, spoken by Edgar when he's disguised as the madman Poor Tom. It's a poem about a quest for the Dark Tower – only we don't know why the knight is doing it, simply that many have tried and failed before (including Giles and Cuthbert – hence Giles Cuthbertson in *The Broken King*.) It's a hugely atmospheric poem which manages to create tension out of stasis; and I have always been fascinated by the idea of the Dark Tower, as many writers before me have. It looms in the collective mind, frightening yet enthralling.

With Browning, I would recommend "My Last Duchess" to young readers, a poem about a very sinister Duke.

Do you have any tips for anyone who wants to be a writer?

Read, observe, listen, practise. I think, especially today, what with the proliferation of writing courses and even degrees, that people view "writing" as something that can be not only taught, but learned and then used professionally. Some of these things may be true, but it's more complicated than that.

If you have an urge to write, or find it easy to write, then now is no better time than to hone your skills: look at what people say and what they do; think about how people behave and why they behave in those ways. Stories can be found anywhere and everywhere: look around your classroom and there will be hundreds of stories. The writer's job is to find them, tease them out and make them accessible and interesting to the reader. Remember that: writers have readers.